Reactions of adolescents to being interviewed about their sexual assault experiences.

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Abstract:

Following extensive interviews about their sexual activities and possible sexual assault experiences, 66 moderately delinquent adolescents were asked a series of post interview questions to determine their levels of comfort/discomfort with various elements of the interview proper. This was done so that the interviewers could provide counseling or other assistance to any youth who reported significant distress following the interview experience. None of the youthful participants required such assistance and surprisingly few of them reported specific distress. On the contrary, a majority of the sample reported feeling substantially or markedly comfortable with most aspects of their interviews and 95% indicated that they would be willing to participate in subsequent, similar interviews. Prevailing concerns regarding the untoward effects of interviewing youths about their sexual histories, including rape experiences, are discussed in terms of these findings, and some methodological considerations concerning the gathering of sexual assault data directly from minors are presented.

Keywords: sexual assault | adolescents | sex research | interview experiences

Article:

Although a few investigators have successfully assessed normative sexual behavior among nonclinical samples of adolescents *via* direct interview (e.g., Wagner, Fujita, & Pion, 1973), interview research focusing on child sexual assult, per se, continues to be limited by social and methodological obstacles. The most persistent methodological problems center around the practical need for parental consent to interview minors about their sexual behavior and experiences. Given a sample of prospective adolescent respondents, some parents will not be located and of those who are, some will deny consent. This not only sets the stage for probable selection bias (see Hopkins, 1977) but may actually place the interviewed youth at risk if, for instance, a youthful respondent is later interrogated by a parent who has been sexually abusing the child.

Compounding this problem is a related obstacle arising from societal taboos prohibiting adults (including social scientists) from talking with (or interviewing) children and adolescents about their sexual assault experiences. Clinical exploration of the details of specific known or reported incidents of sexual assaults against minors may be encouraged or at least allowed. Conversely, discussion of personal victimization experiences with random (or other) samples of children not identified, a priori, as assault victims is not widely tolerated. The two rationales most often encountered in support of this longstanding prohibition are: that direct interviews with children about sexual matters, generally, may adversely affect the development of their subsequent sexual attitudes and behavior, and that such discussions, especially if they raise the question of the child's possible involvement in such things as incest and rape, will create anxiety, psychological pain, or other emotional distress. The first caution has been largely dispelled by Fujita, Wagner, Perthow, and Pion (1971) who found that the sexual attitudes and behavior of young college students who had been interviewed about their sexual activities had not changed appreciably several months after the interviews. The latter concern, however, persists despite the fact that it remains empirically unsubstantiated.

In the face of this prevailing sentiment, most researchers have understandably restricted their investigations to clinical samples of identified victims (e.g., DeFrancis, 1979; Giarretto, 1976; Krasner, Meyer, & Carroll, 1977). Such victim-only samples suffer in that they represent only a small proportion of the total population of sexual assault victims and because they may be substantially different, on very relevant dimensions, from unidentified victims. Others have circumvented the problem by studying police reports and hospital records instead of children themselves (e.g., Amir, 1971; Everett & Jimerson, 1977; Hayman & Lanza, 1971), or have collected retrospective data from college students or adults about their childhood assault experiences (e.g., Finkelhor, 1979, 1980; Gagnon, 1965; Landis, 1956). Although these efforts have produced sorely needed estimates of the incidence of child sexual assault and have contributed to our increasingly better understanding of the child rape phenomenon, they have, thus far, failed to effect a working technology for its prevention. Jones, Gruber, and Timbers (1981) have argued that such a technology will be derived only through careful comparative analyses of the behaviors and environments of both child assault victims and non-victims from the same populations. Such analyses, if they are to minimize the major problems associated with retrospective, verbally reported data, may necessitate the gathering of explicit information from children and adolescents about their sexual assault experiences. These adult-child dialogues have been largely precluded by the parental consent problems mentioned above and by the undocumented, but nevertheless pervasive, view that children are substantially distressed by such interactions.

In the present study the results of a direct assessment of the actual reactions, among a nonclinical sample of young adolescents, to being interviewed explicitly and extensively about their personal sexual activities and sexual assault histories are described. It should be noted that these data were not originally collected for the purpose of testing a formal hypothesis about the nature of

children's reactions to frank discussions about sexual matters. Rather, they were gathered as part of a youth protection strategy which was used in connection with a larger investigation of the incidence and situational factors surrounding sexual assaults against moderately delinquent adolescents (see Jones, et al., 1981). It was the nature of the observed and measured reactions of these children to the sexual assault interviews which prompted the preparation of this report.

Method

Subjects

Ninety-one adolescents (ages 13-17) from a semi-rural, multi-county region of central Appalachia were invited to participate in extensive interviews concerning their sexual knowledge, their sexual activities, and their possible sexual assault experiences. These youths were selected for study by virtue of their current or recent residence in delinquency treatment programs in their respective communities. All had histories of predelinquent problems (e.g., antisocial behavior, school failure, running away) or had been adjudicated for specific delinquent acts. Of the 91 youths, 82% (42) of the females and 60% (24) of the males were actually interviewed. Reasons for nonparticipation were as follows: After a thorough discussion of the method and purpose of the study and the nature of their participation in it (with their parents or guardians present), 4 females and 11 males chose not to participate. In addition, the parents or guardians of five females and five males (who, themselves, were willing to participate) declined their children's participation. Formal statements of informed consent reiterating the details of the study were signed by the remaining 66 youths and their parents or guardians.

Procedure

On the basis of much informal and intuitive guidance cautioning that the youthful subjects of this study might well be distressed, at least temporarily, by the frank nature and substance of the interviews, a number of procedures were followed to anticipate, identify, and help resolve any anxiety or other discomfort experienced by the interviewees. One of these safeguards involved systematically questioning all participants, at the conclusion of their respective interviews, about their levels of comfort or discomfort, both generally, and regarding specific aspects of the interview. Youths' responses to these postinterview questions were recorded and constitute the data of the present study. Only those aspects of the method of the original study which may have influenced the participants' reactions to the interviews will be noted in the remainder of this section.

The aforementioned informed consent statements specified, among other things, that youth participation was strictly voluntary and that any youth would be free to terminate his or her interview at any time and for any reason. This point was reiterated to each participant at the outset of each interview.

All interviews were conducted in private and comfortable surroundings which proved convenient and acceptable to the respondents. Although the interviews were designed to elicit responses to a specific set of questions, interviewers were carefully instructed, trained, and rehearsed to approach each interview in a conversational, matter-of-fact, and nonjudgmental manner. Each participant was offered a choice as to the sex of his/her interviewer, and all were informed that they would be paid $5 for their time and assistance with the research, even if they chose not to answer certain questions or to terminate their participation before their interviews were completed.

The following features of the interview format and protocol are pertinent to the present study as they may have had a bearing on the reactions of participants to their interviews: (a) Each interview was prefaced by a specific effort to place the respondent at ease and to establish a comfortable, conversational atmosphere without misrepresenting the intent of the enterprise. During this brief orientation, interviewers paraphrased from a prompt sheet which included such statements as, "The purpose of this interview is to find out about some of the experiences young people like yourself have while growing up. In particular, we are interested in finding out how often young people are forced to have sexual relations, or take part in other sexual activity with adults or other young people and how they feel about it" and, "During the interview I will ask you questions about yourself, and about your relationships with other young people, your parents, and other adults. Some of these questions will be about your sexual experiences. Try not to be embarrassed by the questions and remember that we would rather you be honest and refuse to answer a question than to tell us something that is not true. Take your time and try to remember clearly before answering each question, and again, we appreciate your help with our research." (b) Prior to questioning about sexual activities or assault experiences, each respondent was asked a series of probe questions to determine his/her understanding of concepts such as intercourse, rape, incest, etc. Specific definitions of these and other concepts such as oral and anal intercourse were discussed with each respondent, (c) Following this effort to establish a workable and palatable terminology, participants were asked a series of questions concerning their general sexual activities such as, "Have you ever had any kind of sexual intercourse?" and (if "Yes") "How old were you when you first had sexual intercourse?" (d) A subsequent aspect of the interview contained items such as, "Have you ever been raped or sexually assaulted?," designed to determine if the respondent had a history of sexual victimization. Those youths who reported evidence of sexual assault were asked for as much detail concerning the circumstances surrounding the incident(s) as they were able and willing to provide including their age at the time, circumstances of the assault, description of the offender, etc. (e) The duration of the interviews averaged 1.5 hours, (f) Interviewers were young professionals studying and/or working in the field of child care and research.

Immediately following the interviews, all respondents were asked a series of post-interview questions intended to assess their subjective levels of comfort or discomfort with the interview experience. These post-interview questions were introduced as follows by the inter viewers:

"That concludes the major part of the interview. Thank you again for your help and cooperation. Now I would like to ask you just a few questions about how you are feeling now and how you felt about answering the kinds of questions we have just discussed." The interviewers then proceeded directly with the post-interview questions (see below).

Validity

The validity of verbally reported, subjective state data, particularly when they concern sensitive subject matter, is almost inherently questionable. The present study is not excepted. Rephrased repeat questions included in the interview proper, as a guard against unreliability, revealed no instance of suspected response fabrication. Although this was not done with the post-interview questions, because they were not initially intended for formal analysis, it was the impression of the interviewers (all of whom had substantial previous experience collecting data from teenagers) that youth responses to the interview and the post-interview questions were generally thoughtful and sincere.

Results

Although all of the participants were apprised of their prerogative to "discontinue the interview at any time and for any reason," at the time they consented to participate and again just prior to each interview, none of the 66 youths chose to exercise this option. Nor did any of the 66 exhibit any behavior during the interviews that might prompt their respective interviewers to initiate the termination of the interview. The most serious adverse reaction noted by the interviewers was mild embarrassment among a few youths during that part of the interview in which their technical knowledge of sexual terminology was assessed. Such embarrassment was most likely among respondents whose sexual vocabulary was limited to vernacular or slang expressions. Interviewers had been instructed to adopt the youths' language under such circumstances, and this tactic was sufficient to ease the embarrassment of all respondents who experienced it. Moreover, none of the participants' behavior during the interviews, or their responses to the post-interview questions, suggested the need for counseling or other attention addressed to participant anxiety or distress.

The responses of the 65 youths1 to the post-interview comfort-level questions are summarized below. Four of the seven questions were amenable to statistical comparison, and responses to these questions are tabulated by sex and by the presence or absence of a victimization history among the females (none of the males reported victimization experiences).

Question #1: How are you feeling right now?

To this open-ended initial question, over two-thirds (69.2%) of the participants responded with statements such as, "okay," "fine," "good," "all right," "comfortable," or the like. Ten (or 15.4%) of the sample offered markedly positive responses such as, "great," "terrific," "better than before," "very happy," etc. The remaining 10 (15.4%) respondents gave responses that were

difficult to assign along a comfort dimension, e.g., "weird," "funny," and "tired." None of the youths reported specifically negative feelings.

Question #2: How comfortable did you feel during the interview?

This question required graded responses in one of six ordinal categories from "very comfortable" to "very uncomfortable." As shown in Table 1, over three-fourths of the sample reported feeling "very comfortable" (16.9%) or "comfortable" (60.0%). Ten (15.4%) said they were "somewhat comfortable" and five (7.7%) indicated that they were "somewhat uncomfortable" during some parts of the interview. No respondents reported feeling "uncomfortable" or "very uncomfortable," and differences between male and female respondents and between female victims and non-victims were not statistically significant (all *t's* < 1).

Table 1 is omitted from this formatted document.

Question #3: What parts of the interview made you feel most uncomfortable?

Although this question attempted to force a negative response, well over half (58.5%) of the participants insisted that no aspect of the interview caused them any discomfort. Twenty-six (40.0%) of the youths felt most uncomfortable discussing sexual definitions and their personal sexual activities, and six (9.2%—all female victims) felt most uncomfortable discussing their sexual assault experiences. Some assault victims reported equal discomfort in discussing definitions/ activities and victimization experiences, producing totals exceeding 100% for this question.

Question #4: How comfortable did you feel answering questions about your sexual activities?

This question also required graded responses along a dimension of comfortableness and, as indicated in Table 2, over three-fourths of the sample responded with "very comfortable" (12.4%), "comfortable" (53.8%), or "somewhat comfortable" (21.9%). Six youths (9.2%) reported feeling "somewhat uncomfortable" and two participants (3.1%—both assault victims) felt "uncomfortable." Again, statistical comparisons by sex and victimization history were not significant (all *t's* < 1).

Tables 2-3 are omitted from this formatted document.

Question #5: Has talking about or recalling anything that we have discussed upset you or made you feel sad or depressed?

This was a "yes/no" question with a "don't know/no opinion" option. Table 3 shows that almost the entire sample (92.3%) answered in the negative. Five youths (7.7%) answered "yes." These five youths were asked this follow-up question:

*Question #*6: *What is it that made you feel that way?*

The responses were, "the rape part, but I'll feel good in a few minutes" (a female victim), "talking about things I've done" (this female non-victim was willing to be interviewed again and commented, regarding her participation, that she "enjoyed it"), "talking about a court appearance" (unrelated to a rape incident) (the one male), "talking about a friend who has been raped" (a female non-victim), and the fifth youth, a female victim, offered no further descriptive comment.

Question #7: *If we asked you to help us again, how willing would you be to be interviewed about things like we've just discussed?*

This final question begged responses along a six-category dimension of willingness from "very willing" to "not willing at all" and was included as a somewhat more objective supplement to the previous questions. The responses of two males could not be categorized, e.g., "It would depend on how I felt." As shown in Table 4, most of the remaining responses were divided between "very willing" (40.0%) and "willing" (55.4%). One female victim (1.6%) indicated that she was only "somewhat willing" to be interviewed again. None of the participants were "somewhat unwilling," "unwilling," or "not willing at all" to be interviewed again. Response differences by sex and victimization history were not statistically significant (all $t's < 1$).

A review of the tabled data, taken as a whole, reveals that a total of 18 responses indicated some degree of discomfort, i.e., fell below "somewhat comfortable" on Questions 2 or 4, below "somewhat willing" on Question 7, or were affirmative or "other" on the "yes/no" question (#5). These 18 responses were accounted for by 15 different youths, with 12 youths indicating discomfort on only 1 of the 4 questions and 3 youths indicating discomfort on 2 of the 4 items.

Discussion

The past decade has seen the first serious attempts to estimate accurately the incidence of child sexual assault, and the estimates have lent an atmosphere of urgency to the task of better understanding and controlling the problem. One impediment to a comprehensive understanding of child rape has been the reluctance of researchers to gather detailed interview data about possible sexual assaults from intact, nonclinical samples of minors. This reluctance stems, in large part, from methodological difficulties associated with obtaining youths' and, more particularly, parental consent for such research. Some of these parental permission problems, in turn, relate to a broad and persisting societal sentiment that explicit dialogues with children and adolescents concerning their sexual activities and possible assault experiences may be inherently stressful, provocative, anxiety producing, or otherwise painful. The results of the present direct assessment of the reactions of 65 adolescents to intensive and explicit interviews concerning their sexual activities and victim experiences raise questions about the basis of this problematic, albeit well intended, concern.

The large majority of the youthful participants reported no substantial discomfort following their individual interviews. On the contrary, most participants reported feeling generally comfortable

with their participation and many expressed pronounced positive reactions to the experience. Several respondents even commented informally to their interviewers that they were grateful for the opportunity to discuss victimization incidents which they had not previously shared with an adult. And, despite reiterated reminders that their participation was voluntary and could be discontinued at any point, none of the participants chose to terminate their interviews.

For those items which lent themselves to statistical comparison, the responses of males were not significantly different from those of females nor were the responses of female victims significantly different from those of female non-victims. Less than 25% of the respondents reported any degree of discomfort with the interview. Only three respondents reported mild discomfort on more than one post-interview item. Finally, among the eight female assault victims who reported some discomfort, the source of that discomfort was more likely to be discussion of their sexual activities in general than discussion of their sexual victimization experiences, per se.

These results are at odds with abiding ideology and might be accounted for in several alternative ways. First, perhaps the sample was especially prone to insensitivity toward the interview material. The sample was constituted of youths with delinquent histories who might, thus, have been more than normally callous to the language and content of the interviews or might have wished to create the impression of such callousness.

Second, the results may be directly related to the numerous, and apparently effective, measures taken in the course of the study to minimize the likelihood of participant discomfort. These were detailed in the method section and included: (a) careful attention to parental and participant informed consent, (b) assurance of absolute privacy and youth comfort during the interviews, (c) communication to participants that they would never be identified with the information they provided, (d) judicious selection and careful training of the interviewers, and (e) the purposefully ordered format of the interviews, i.e., beginning with nonsensitive questions, progressing to questions concerning general sexual activity, and, only as required, to questions concerning the details of specific sexual assault experiences. We reiterate emphatically here that, despite the foregoing precautions and the favorable reaction of most of the participants to them, a number of the respondents still reported mild discomfort with isolated aspects of their interviews, and a few were moderately distressed by several aspects of the experience. The point is that subject-sensitive procedures such as those applied in this study represent the beginning, certainly not the final word, in minimizing the participant discomfort in such research. Subject distress in such research must be assumed and the risk of such distress weighed against the potential benefits of the effort.

Finally, it is not inconceivable that we, the professional and lay adults in this society, have quite simply projected our own learned distress regarding the explicit discussion of sexual matters upon our surprisingly sophisticated and open progeniture.

Although the present data offer no definitive support for any of these interpretations over the others, the authors and the interviewers are inclined to believe that the generally positive reactions were related most directly to a combination of the latter two explanations. That is, that children in modern society may be remarkably more comfortable discussing personal sexual topics than most adults credit them for and that, under conditions which reflect a genuine, imprurient, non-judgmental, and confidential interest in their sexual activities and problems, most adolescents are both agreeable to, and largely comfortable with, frank conversations with adults about these things.

However they are interpreted, the results of this study have several implications for future child sexual assault research and the utility of the findings produced by it. In the absence of a basis in data assessing the nature of youth reactions to interviews involving sensitive topics, important decisions concerning the focus and method of child assault studies will continue to be influenced, if not dictated, by preconception. The present study represents a preliminary step toward that data base and has emphasized the potential value of adolescents as an important source of information regarding an unhappy phenomenon which frequently involves them.

It is our hope that these modest data will: (a) encourage other investigators to reconsider their trepidations about collecting sensitive interview data directly from minors, (b) alert them to the importance and utility of assessing the post-research reactions of the subjects of their studies, (c) inspire new and more effective ways to further minimize the actual distress experienced by young subjects of such research, and (d) provide a very preliminary basis for attenuating legitimate parental concerns about the effects of this kind of research with their children. These things will occasion new opportunities to avoid some of the pitfalls often associated with retrospective verbal report data and may serve to expand the child sexual assault literature to include samples of "children" rather than samples of "young victims," exclusively.

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Notes

1 The responses of one female to the post-interview questions were inadvertently not recorded.